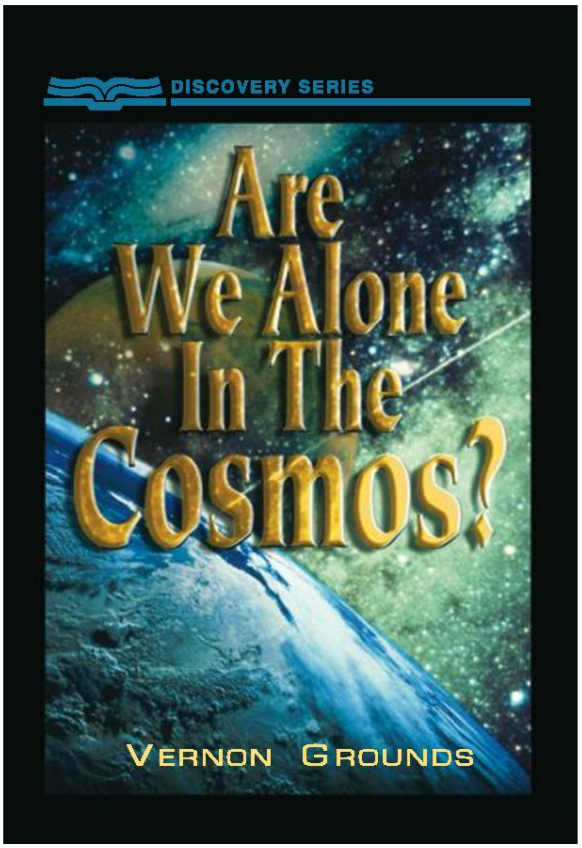
DISCOVERY SERIES
Are We Alone In The Cosmos?
VERNON GROUNDS

ARE WE ALONE IN THE COSMOS?

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Hardly a year goes by without the appearance in the news media of a major scientific speculation about extraterrestrial life. This question has been a common one among civilizations from ancient times. "Virtual reality" technology in our day, however, has dramatized the issue to such an extent that even small children fantasize about creatures from outer space landing in their neighborhood.

If life similar to ours does exist out there, what would it mean to followers of Christ? Some have speculated that it would challenge the reliability of the Bible. But is that true? Is God's Word to mankind too limited to account for the possibility of other created beings in faraway galaxies?

In this booklet, Dr. Vernon Grounds, chancellor of Denver Seminary, confirms that our God and His Word are "big enough" to meet all the challenges of the universe. *Martin R. De Haan II*

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THE QUESTION OF EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL LIFE

For centuries, theologians have speculated on what it would mean to the religiously devout people of the world to discover that mankind is not the sole "advanced" life-form in the cosmos. In particular, what would the discovery mean to followers of Christ? This is a question that won't go away. And if Christians don't address it, Hollywood will soon own it.

The question of other civilizations existing somewhere out there has been speculated on at least from the time of the Greeks until today. It is the stock-in-trade of the movie industry, with several films in the past decade assuming that we're not alone. Belief that extraterrestrial (ET) intelligent life exists is the soul of the perennially popular *Star Trek* series. In addition, science news itself has kept the question on the front pages of our newspapers: a meteorite found in Antarctica purported to provide evidence of primitive life on Mars, the apparent discovery of planets existing in other solar systems, the death of veteran ET seeker Carl Sagan. Even NASA has made "ET contact" a major thrust of its research.

THE SEARCH FOR ET

Universities around the world have well-funded research projects dealing with the "search for extra-terrestrial intelligence" (SETI). Perhaps the most well-known of these is the project carried on by the University of California at

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Berkeley. Using the giant Arecibo radio telescope in Puerto Rico, the UC SETI Institute receives and analyzes cosmic background "noise" reaching earth from the fringes of our galaxy and beyond. The SETI project at Berkeley also utilizes the PCs of more than a million individuals, corporations, and universities around the world when their users are not actively connected. While these volunteers are asleep or are otherwise away from their computers, SETI-at-Home sends sets of "signals" to their normally idle PCs to examine them for possible evidence of a deliberate transmission from some other intelligent race elsewhere in the universe.

The question of other civilizations existing somewhere out there has been speculated on at least from the time of the Greeks until today.

NOT A NEW QUESTION

Recent speculations on this issue jolted my memory. I recalled that in 1955—yes, more than 45 years ago—I had come across articles that mentioned the potential of other intelligent civilizations elsewhere in the universe. In fact, I had incorporated some of that material into an address I gave to several churches, talking about the possible impact on religion of such a discovery. The material I used then is still both compelling and relevant. For example, there was this

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letter an Edwin Aiken had contributed to the *Christian Century*, the leading magazine of mainline Protestantism in our country at the time:

> Recent observations in astronomy may lead to revolutionary results in human thinking. The Hale telescope has revealed the existence in the universe of a billion galaxies. (A galaxy is an assembly of an immense number of stars and planets, of which our Milky Way is an example.) From this discovery Prof. Harlow Shapley, the eminent astronomer of Harvard University, reached the conclusion that one hundred million earths, peopled much like this earth, may exist. If this turns out to be true, it would have a tremendous effect on man's scientific, religious, and general outlook. It should be noted that there is no proof, as yet, that anything like human life is to be found on other planets. But the probability is so great and the consequences for religion would be so momentous that religious journals, religious thinkers, and theological seminaries should begin to consider

"It seems incredible that ours should be the only inhabited planet among the millions of worlds that must exist among the stars."
Arthur C. Clarke

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> with the utmost seriousness what is involved.

That letter in the May 25, 1955, issue of the *Christian Century* made the gears of my mind begin to whirl a little faster than usual. After all, I was serving in a seminary, so I felt as if Edwin Aiken's letter was a personal challenge.

About the same time, May 28, 1955, an article by Robert S. Richardson, astronomer at the Mt. Wilson and Palomar Observatories, appeared in the *Saturday Review*, a publication now defunct. Rather sensationally titled, "The Day After We Land On Mars," it read, in part:

> Doubtless, men have always dreamed of traveling to far-off worlds more wonderful and (presumably) happier than their own. Until very recently the idea of travel beyond the earth has hardly been more than a vague dream. Indeed, few ever contended that it could be anything else. Now suddenly the spectacular advances in rocketry and electronics have made space travel a possibility within our lifetime—within the next 10 years, according to some. The prospect it holds before us is dazzling. The opportunities for discovery seem unlimited and our enthusiasm for exploration in space unbounded.

A few months later, on November 26, the *Saturday Review* featured another article on this subject. In "The Planets Are Not Enough," the famous British astrophysicist Arthur C. Clarke asserted:

> It seems incredible that ours should be the only

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> inhabited planet among the millions of worlds that must exist among the stars, but we cannot solve this problem by speculating about it. If it can be solved at all, it will be by visiting other planets to see for ourselves. . . . Though the difficulties of interstellar travel are stupendous, they are not insuperable. It is by no means certain that man must remain trapped in the Solar System for eternity, never to know if he is a lonely freak without brothers and/or competitors. . . . The men of 500 or 1,000 years from now will have motivations very different from ours, but if they are men at all, they will still burn with that restless curiosity which has driven us over this world and which is about to take us into space. Sooner or later we will come to the edge of the Solar System and will be looking out across the ultimate abyss. We may pause there for centuries, gathering our strength. Then we will reach out for the stars.

These long-ago, mind-stretching speculations prompted me to consider the issue of extraterrestrial life and what it might imply. My reflections back then brought me to some tentative conclusions about two central questions: (1) Is life possible anywhere else? and (2) Would the discovery of extraterrestrial life improve the human condition? The remainder of this booklet addresses those conclusions, to which I still adhere.

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IS LIFE POSSIBLE ANYWHERE ELSE?

Some astronomers have been emphatically affirmative about the existence of extraterrestrial life. Dr. Harlow Shapley, former director of Harvard College Observatory, insisted that there might be millions of "earths" inhabited by creatures somewhat like ourselves. That opinion, advanced by such a highly respected scientist, was also endorsed by the late Carl Sagan.

Given such weighty endorsement, I concluded that the probability of life like our own existing elsewhere could not be dismissed out of hand. But in 1956 I discovered a truth that must be kept steadily in mind. We had no convincing evidence then to support the belief that life exists elsewhere in the cosmos. And today, after spending billions of dollars in extraterrestrial research and in the development of technology that provides us with millions of more facts and the capacity to analyze billions of bits of data, there is still no evidence for the existence of ET. That belief is still a conjecture—a pure and simple guess.

There is still no evidence for the existence of ET. That belief is still a conjecture—a pure and simple guess.

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SCIENTIFIC REASONS FOR SKEPTICISM

There are good reasons for skepticism. Consider the following scientific conditions for life:

Conditions For Life Are Specific And Rare.

- Beyond a certain degree of heat, organized matter simply disintegrates, and most of the heavenly bodies are far too hot for life in any conceivable form to exist.
- Beyond a certain degree of cold, no activity is possible since matter congeals into frozen immobility, and many of the heavenly bodies are far too cold for life anything like ours to exist.
- Life requires a certain atmosphere, and the nature of an atmosphere is determined by the size of the planet it surrounds. Some of these bodies are so big that their atmosphere is too heavy to support life; some are so small that their atmosphere is too rarefied to support life.
- Life requires water and several other specific elements.

Newsweek (May 4, 1998) had a cover article on "The Birth Of Planets." It repeated what I had concluded from my earlier reading. The conditions that support life are extremely rare in the cosmos beyond the atmosphere of our own planet:

> Astronomers have drawn up a short list of conditions for making a planet that can support life. The first requirement is that the planet not be in a "wacky intersecting

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orbit." That's a technical expression meaning it can't be on a collision course with an asteroid or comet or another planet. . . . Next, the planet has to be cool, which means it can't be too close to the star, so its crust can solidify. Luck helps too: Any planet forming near enough to a star to avoid becoming frozen is also too near to contain carbon, nitrogen, or water. These chemicals seem to be necessary for life, and all of them would have been vaporized by a young, hot star. They can, however, solidify farther out—around Jupiter, say. With any luck, comets carry them toward the new planet, which is apparently how earth got seeded with the raw material of life. Life also needs an atmosphere. Water vapor, carbon dioxide, and other gases trapped in rock can form one, but the planet needs to be heavy enough that its gravity can hold on to it.

Earth Is Uniquely Habitable. By some curious coincidence, our earth has the precise combination of conditions essential for a planet to be habitable. Our earth is therefore a kind of freak—one of the oddities of the cosmos. Christian

By some curious coincidence, our earth has the precise combination of conditions essential for a planet to be habitable.

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astronomer Hugh Ross lists 33 different constants in our solar system that make the earth capable of supporting human life. After calculating the probability that such a planet would occur in the cosmos, he concluded that "much less than one chance in a million trillion exists that even one such planet would occur anywhere in the universe" (*The Creator And The Cosmos*, NavPress, 1995). Yet we do know of one—only one: earth!

Astronomer Geoffrey Marcey, one of the discoverers of planets in other solar systems, remarks on the apparently odd fact that the planets in our solar system rotate in almost completely circular orbits around our star—a fact that makes human life possible. Apparently other planets rotate around their stars in egg-shaped orbits that make temperature variations so extreme that life as we know it could not exist on them. On his Web site, Marcey calls this fact "remarkably fortuitous" for us human beings. He further states that "it is probably no accident that our solar system contains circular orbits." Yet *accident* is the word many religiously skeptical scientists and philosophers have been using for decades to describe the existence of human life on earth—and in the cosmos. Bertrand Russell, for instance, declared in his book *Religion And Science* (Oxford University Press, 1935) that mankind is "a

Mankind is "a curious accident in a backwater" of the universe.
Bertrand Russell

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curious accident in a backwater" of the universe.

The Universe Was Designed For Life.

On another front, new information is overwhelming the centers of scientific research with evidence that our universe seems to have been "fine-tuned" for human life from the very beginning. This understanding is expressed in a concept astrophysicists call "the anthropic principle." In a nutshell, the anthropic principle says that "all the seemingly arbitrary and unrelated constants in physics have one strange thing in common: these are precisely the values you need if you want to have a universe capable of producing life." This is the conclusion of atheist-turned-believer Patrick Glynn in his book *God: The Evidence* (Prima Publishing, 1999). Glynn notes that "the picture of the universe bequeathed to us by the most advanced 20th-century science is closer in spirit to the vision presented in the book of Genesis than anything offered by science since Copernicus" (some 500 years ago).

So we have this fascinating couplet of facts: (1) The universe itself gives us evidence that it was designed from the beginning to produce human life. (2) All other known factors in the universe lead to the conclusion that only on earth is such human life possible. It's as though an almost infinite funnel has directed all the forces and constants in the universe down to what Carl Sagan termed "this pale blue dot" called earth. Some Designer seems to have planned it all. Such a realization led another religiously skeptical astronomer, Robert Jastrow, to comment in his book *God And The Astronomers*

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(Norton and Company, 1978): "For the scientist who has lived in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

In the light of these facts, what conclusion emerges? It is highly improbable that life like ours, or life of any other kind, exists elsewhere in the universe. It *may* exist, to be sure. One thing alone we can assert definitely: Our earth is the sole heavenly body on which we *know* that life exists.

A THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT AGAINST SKEPTICISM

For the sake of argument, however, let's assume that there are other earths, perhaps many of them, inhabited by beings somewhat like ourselves. Does that assumption destroy or modify biblical faith?

In the early decades of the 19th century, as evidence mounted that the cosmos is measureless, an idea called the "astronomical objection" gained popularity and challenged believers with this question: How can Christians claim special significance for mankind when we are hardly more than a grain of sand in some cosmic Sahara?

Thomas Chalmers, an eminent Scottish theologian of the 19th century, was also a first-rate mathematician who understood the scientific theories then being advanced. Aware that unbelievers viewed the "astronomical objection" as a crushing argument against the credibility of the

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Christian faith, he confronted it head-on. In 1816 he gave a series of lectures published under

How can Christians claim special significance for mankind when we are hardly more than a grain of sand in some cosmic Sahara?

the title *Astronomical Discourses*, in which he acknowledged our globe's insignificance as compared to the vastness of space:

> Does not the largeness of that field, which astronomy lays open to the view of modern science, throw suspicion over the truth of the gospel history? How shall we reconcile the greatness of that wonderful movement which was made in heaven for the redemption of fallen man, with the comparative meanness and obscurity of our species? This is a popular argument against Christianity not much dwelt upon in books, but, we believe, a great deal insinuated in conversation, and having no small influence on the amateurs of a superficial philosophy. At any rate, it is right that every such argument should be met and manfully confronted; nor do we know a more discreditable surrender of our religion than to act as if she had anything to fear from the ingenuity of her most accomplished adversaries.

Indeed, long before the invention of the telescope, the psalmist

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David marveled at the utter tininess of our human dwelling place when seen in its cosmic setting: "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (Ps. 8:3-4).

Our contemporary Carl Sagan, who wrote about the "billions and billions" of stars in the countless galaxies we now know exist, describes our earth as "astronomically sub-microscopic."

Chalmers refuted the "astronomical objection" by affirming that beliefs about the divine origin and authority of the Bible would not be threatened even if intelligent life were found someplace other than on earth:

> The world in which we live is a round ball of a determined magnitude and occupies its own place in the firmament. But when we explore the unlimited tracts of that space, which is everywhere around us, we move with other balls of equal or superior magnitude, and from which our earth would either be invisible, or appear as small as any of those twinkling stars which are seen on the countenance of heaven. Why then suppose that this spot, little at least in the immensity which surrounds it, should be the exclusive abode of life and of intelligence? What reason to think that those mightier globes on other parts of creation, and which we have discovered to be worlds in magnitude, are not also worlds in use and in dignity? Why should we think the great Architect

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of nature, supreme in wisdom as He is in power, would call these stately mansions into existence and leave them unoccupied?

Even if Chalmers was mistaken in his speculations regarding life on other planets, his contention shows that a biblicist need not be apprehensive about that possibility.

We must keep in mind, however, that no evidence has yet been found to support it. Our earth remains unique among all known heavenly bodies. As far as we have been able to ascertain, it is the sole habitable planet in the cosmos.

BIBLICAL REASONS FOR SKEPTICISM

It is important that we correct some of the grossly misinformed ideas that prevail about the Bible's view of the physical universe. Instead of being either anthropocentric (man-centered) or geocentric (earth-centered) in its perspective, the Bible sets forth a remarkable view of created reality. It does not assert that humans are the only intelligent and personal beings in the whole sweep of space. On the contrary, Scripture asserts that there are vast multitudes of non-human beings, both intelligent and personal,

The earth remains unique among all known heavenly bodies. As far as we have been able to ascertain, it is the sole habitable planet in the cosmos.

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who inhabit regions that elude the detection of our telescopes and microscopes. These beings, which lack material bodies, are angels and demons—great hierarchies of good and evil spirits. While the Bible tells us little about them, it does say that these creatures, without exception, are vitally concerned about the "insignificant" planet on which we live. In fact, when we study what Scripture says about the relationship of our planet to the cosmos and these spirit creatures, three engrossing truths emerge: Earth is (1) the theater of the universe; (2) the battlefield of the universe; and (3) the schoolhouse of the universe.

Earth Is The Theater Of The Universe. First, this insignificant planet is the theater of the universe. Angels and demons alike observe with fascination the things occurring here—not the world-shaking events that furnish material for historians, but the things that pertain to the outworking of divine salvation. The demons hope for the frustration of God's redemptive purposes; the angels hope that these purposes will see a glorious fulfillment. Hence, as the angels watch, they do so with intense sympathy and concern, sometimes rejoicing as God's purposes are fulfilled, sometimes saddened as God's purposes are frustrated. The reaction of the demons is exactly the opposite.

Does all of this sound fantastic or seem incredible? Consider 1 Peter 1:12.

> *To [the prophets] it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you*

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through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

Notice the words "things which angels desire to look into" and compare them to 1 Corinthians 4:9.

I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

Angels, then, are engrossed by this spectacle of redemption. These passages, in short, declare that our earth is the object of interest to a host of invisible beings. Our earth is thus the very theater of the universe where the drama of redemption is being played out before a vast audience. The angels are hoping for human redemption. The demons are hoping for humanity's destruction.

Our earth is the very theater of the universe where the drama of redemption is being played out before a vast audience.

Earth Is The Battleground Of The Universe. Second, this insignificant planet is the battleground of the universe. It is the center of cosmic struggle. Hosts of spiritual beings, evil creatures who are intelligent and personal, are arrayed against God and His redeemed earthlings, attempting to defeat the

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ends of divine love and mercy. Aligned with God are angelic beings working to further the objectives of grace and justice. The apostle Paul wrote:

> *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:11-12).*

These evil beings are under the guidance and power of Satan, a malignant leader whose mind and will and heart are totally corrupt. These demons try to blind humans to the truth.

> *Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them (2 Cor. 4:3-4).*

In addition, as Jesus warned, demons snatch away the seed of the gospel while it is being proclaimed, diverting the attention of hearers by the alluring vanities of this life.

> *Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the Word out of*

Our small planet is the battleground between good and evil, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.

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their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved (Lk. 8:12).

Consequently, unbelievable as it may seem, the fate of the cosmos is being decided here on earth. Our small planet is the battleground between good and evil, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.

Earth Is The Schoolhouse Of The Universe. Third, this insignificant planet is the schoolhouse of the universe. By observing the things that transpire on the human level, angels and demons are learning about the goodness, power, and grace of God. Does this too seem fantastic? If it does, consider Ephesians 3:10.

To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

The content of God's inexhaustible wisdom lies beyond the grasp of our minds. Yet Paul was assuredly affirming that non-human beings are now being taught pivotal lessons about God as they watch the drama of redemption unfold on our earth. The angels, as they come to new levels of understanding, are inspired to new love, new adoration, new obedience. Even the demons realize the truth of divine mercy and power, a reality they fiercely repress. James made this cryptic statement: "The demons believe—and tremble!" (2:19). But one of these days they too will be compelled to confess the truth they now deny (Phil. 2:9-11).

While less than a speck of dust spatially, our earth—as a theater, battleground, and schoolhouse—is the spiritual hub of the cosmos.

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THE COSMIC EFFECTS OF CALVARY'S CROSS

Suppose other inhabitable worlds do exist. If so, they may be the home of non-human beings who are intelligent and personal. They may be rebels against God, and therefore in need of redemption. Yet Scripture makes it clear that no other redemption has been provided, nor will be provided, except through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). Granted, they do not belong to our race, and therefore God Incarnate did not—and could not—die for them as He did for us, by becoming one of us through His virgin birth. Nevertheless, the healing, forgiving, and saving influences of Calvary's cross are not limited to our earth. Quite the reverse!

According to Paul, Jesus Christ is the cosmic Savior, whose death radiates grace and mercy and love to the remote ends of God's creation.

> *[Christ will] reconcile all things to Himself, . . . whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Col. 1:20).*

The implications of this statement are staggering, but its central meaning is clear: Extraterrestrial beings, creatures other than human, are somehow benefited by our Lord's sacrifice. May we not, then, use this text as the springboard for a daring venture of sanctified theorizing? Perhaps the message of God's atoning love will, in some unimaginable way, be communicated to other beings in the cosmos, provided they exist, and exist in a state of sin. The marvel of divine compassion revealed

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through the cross may so grip their hearts and minds as to bring them to trust God, obey God, and serve God in gratitude and obedience.

All of this, of course, is conjecture. But it is delightful conjecture. For even more enjoyment in letting your God-given imagination wander within the limits of biblical truth, read C. S. Lewis' science fiction trilogy. In *Out Of The Silent Planet, Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis considers some far-reaching theological, spiritual, and sociological implications of extraterrestrial civilizations. Although these books were written more than 50 years ago, their implications are perhaps even more significant now.

So, if beings somewhat like ourselves are ever discovered elsewhere in the cosmos, we need not abandon our biblical faith. Even if a visitor from outer space were to land on earth tonight, we can still hold fast to Scripture as God's truth. We can accommodate into our worldview the existence of non-divine beings who are non-human. Nothing in Scripture militates against this conjecture; on the contrary, biblical teaching allows this kind of reverent speculation.

If beings somewhat like ourselves are ever discovered elsewhere in the cosmos, we need not abandon our biblical faith.

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WOULD THE DISCOVERY OF EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL LIFE IMPROVE THE HUMAN CONDITION?

Let's assume that an inhabited or inhabitable planet exists elsewhere in the cosmos. Let's also assume that someday, winged by ingenious technology, earthlings cross interstellar space and reach that planet. Granting these two colossal assumptions, a pertinent issue emerges: Will such a discovery revolutionize human nature? Not in the least.

MANKIND'S PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

Before dealing with that issue, however, let's look at the feasibility of travel to planets outside our solar system. The quotations given previously in this booklet make it clear that contemporary scientists no longer regard that trip as an unrealistic dream. Didn't human beings reach the moon? Then why not believe they can reach out much farther into space? While scientists view venturing into deeper space as lying within the confines of possibility, they are also aware of the immense difficulties that must be overcome before humans can play hopscotch among the planets. First, before a vehicle able to conquer space is constructed, technical problems of incredible complexity require

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solutions. Second, the cost of constructing such a spaceship will be astronomical, and governments may hesitate to foot such a gigantic bill. Third, if by effort of human genius such a vehicle is successfully devised, it must cross millions of miles to reach the nearest planet, passing through frigid emptiness where it may be bombarded by penetrating radiation or struck by meteorites. Fourth, regardless of how fast that spaceship travels, it will take a long time to arrive anywhere.

Scientists are aware of the immense difficulties that must be overcome before humans can play hopscotch among the planets.

So the obstacles are simply tremendous. Yet who can tell? They may be overcome. Further, astronomers point out that if we'd try to communicate with some distant civilization from which we have received a message, the time it would take for us to get a message back would likely be longer than the timeframe of all of human history! That's like Adam making a phone call shortly after he was created and having it finally ring at my house today. If he called collect and I picked up the phone, I'd better be prepared for a major long-distance phone bill! That's 10-10-NO-WAY!

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MANKIND'S EMOTIONAL LIMITATIONS

Another question must be answered. What would be the emotional reaction of any crew that eventually pushed back the cosmic frontiers and carried human life into other worlds? Our intrepid astronauts, if they reached such planets, would be compelled to build protective structures outside of which they couldn't survive. And what would they do there except conduct scientific research as, under strictest surveillance, they occasionally ventured out in their space suits? Boredom, monotony, and tension would be inevitable. And besides that, there would be haunting anxiety and the awareness of lonely isolation perhaps too great for the human psyche to endure. Thus the emotional reaction might be devastating.

MANKIND'S MORAL LIMITATIONS

Let's assume that psychologists carefully picked crews who could adjust themselves to a strange, distant, confining environment. What if humans become semi-domesticated residents of some remote planetary body? Would that stupendous achievement make any essential difference in human nature?

It would make a difference in the range of human experience and knowledge. Think of what we might possibly discover about how the Creator structured the cosmos. Consider what we could learn, especially if elsewhere there are intelligent beings somewhat like ourselves with a different history and culture. Assuming that we established meaningful communication, the economic, educational,

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political, and social impact would likely be more earthshaking than the arrival of Western explorers in the New World.

That historical watershed motivates us to ask again, "Would the nature of people be changed by such a revolutionary event?" The answer is no. A month after our descendants land on that distant planet, it will be glaringly apparent that earthlings there or elsewhere in space will be the same as they were on earth. Their environment may be amazingly different, but their nature will be dismayingly unchanged. Whether on Mars or in Milwaukee, they will have the same burdens, problems, fears, temptations, longings, frustrations, and sins. Whether on Saturn or in Seattle, they will continue to covet, quarrel, and fight. Whether on Uranus or in Eureka, they will be self-centered and self-seeking and with no power to effect the self-healing of their egoism. Whether on Pluto or in Paris, people will still be troubled by greed and anger and lust.

A month after our descendants land on that distant planet, it will be glaringly apparent that earthlings there or elsewhere in space will be the same as they were on earth.

C. S. Lewis, in his essay "Religion And Rocketry," emphasizes the shortcomings of sinful humanity face to face with ET:

I fear the practical, not

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the theoretical, problems which will arise if ever we meet rational creatures which are not human. Against them we shall, if we can, commit all the crimes we have already committed against creatures certainly human but differing from us in features and pigmentation; and the starry heavens will become an object to which good men can look up only with feelings of intolerable guilt, agonizing pity, and burning shame. Of course, after the first debauch of exploitation, we shall make some belated attempt to do better. We shall perhaps send missionaries. But can even missionaries be trusted? "Gun and gospel" have been horribly combined in the past. The missionary's holy desire to save souls has not always been kept quite distinct from the arrogant desire, the busybody's itch, to—as he calls it—"civilize"—as he calls them—the "natives." Would all our missionaries recognize an unfallen race if they met it? Could they? Would they continue to press upon creatures that did not need to be saved the plan of salvation which God has appointed for man? Would they denounce as sins mere differences of behaviors which the spiritual and biological history of these strange creatures fully justified and which God Himself had blessed? Would they try to teach those from whom they had better learn? I do not know (from *The World's Last Night And Other Essays*).

As Lewis warns us, earthlings on any other

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planet will have the same desires we have today. The same temptations with respect to the flesh and the spirit—pride, egocentricity, and self-will—will follow us wherever we go. And so will the same urge to find meaning in existence; the same wondering about life after death; the same longing for faith, hope, and love; the same need for a vital God-to-man relationship.

Distance cannot change human nature in the least. For distance, however great, cannot remove humans from themselves. Faced with a desperate life situation, we all feel the temptation to pack suitcases and leave our troubles behind. Whether we go to South Africa or the French Riviera or Hawaii, we always take ourselves along with us. There is no escape from the human condition. (Philosophers label this the "egocentric predicament.") And unless we can somehow be changed inwardly,

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external change will not avail to make us different. If any significant change in human beings is to take place, it must be accomplished with resources available to us now. And that means a vital faith. It means the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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IS OUR VIEW OF GOD TOO SMALL?

In *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision Of The Human Future In Space,* Carl Sagan challenges believers who try to contain God:

> In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed." Instead they say, "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way." A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge.

Despite the shortcomings of some of its adherents, biblical Christianity does offer precisely such a magnificent view of the Creator and the cosmos. The God of the Bible is great enough to account for all the discoveries and dimensions of astrophysics. Each discovery gives us more of God's truth to revel in and wonder about.

A measureless difference stretches between Sagan's godless worldview and the biblical worldview, yet we can agree with his conclusion:

> The most important step we can take toward [inhabiting other planets] is to make significant

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progress on earth. Even modest improvements in social, economic, and political problems that our global civilization now faces could release enormous resources, both material and human, for other goals. There's plenty of housework to be done here on earth, and our commitment to it must be steadfast.

Even more important than social, economic, and political housework is the task of communicating and implementing spiritual truth. One aspect of that task is to revitalize the shriveled view of God that is widely entertained. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator not only of earth but also of the heavens, is not a limited Being. He is the eternal Spirit who fills all space. And He existed before any Big Bang.

Poet Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911) urged us to expand our understanding of God when he wrote these lines about two little boys who respond in very different ways to their increasing knowledge of the universe:

A boy was born 'mid
little things,
Between a little
world and sky—
And dreamed not of the
cosmic rings
'Round which the circling
planets fly.

He lived in little
works and thoughts,
Where little ventures
grow and plod,
And paced and plowed his
little plots,
And prayed unto his
little God.

But as the mighty
system grew,
His faith grew faint with
many scars;

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The Cosmos widened
in his view—
But God was lost
among His stars.

Another boy in
lowly days,
As he, to little
things was born,
But gathered lore in
woodland ways,
And from the glory
of the morn.

As wider skies broke
on his view,
God greatened in his
growing mind;
Each year he dreamed his
God anew,
And left his older
God behind.

He saw the boundless
scheme dilate,
In star and blossom,
sky and clod;
And as the universe
grew great,
He dreamed it for
a greater God.

But we don't need to conjure up a greater and greater God, imagining one great enough to account for what Sagan called "the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science." All we need to do is turn to the God revealed in Scripture:

God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also (Gen. 1:16).

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Ps. 19:1-4).

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He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name (Ps. 147:4).

"To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing (Isa. 40:25-26).

"Am I a God near at hand," says the Lord, "and not a God afar off? Can anyone hide himself in secret places, so I shall not see him?" says the Lord; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the Lord (Jer. 23:23-24).

All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (Jn. 1:3).

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1-3).

You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created (Rev. 4:11).

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THE RESCUE OF PLANET EARTH

The magnificence of God's being does more than explain the magnificence of the cosmos. No matter how spectacular the advances of science and technology, His "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20 NIV) will forever fill human minds and hearts with astonishment, awe, and adoration.

God's love is as measureless as His power. His wisdom is as inexhaustible as His power. He is not impersonal energy, the cosmic Force. He is a Father who cares, who cared enough to give His one and only Son to become our Savior. The true and loving God is great enough to account for the fathomless complexity of all existence. While His greatness is beyond our comprehension, He desires soul intimacy with each of us.

The message that the Creator of the cosmos loves and cares for the only other intelligent creatures known to exist physically in the vastness of space is the most significant truth the human soul can grasp. The idea of extraterrestrial life is a curiosity. But rescue for lost humanity does not lie in the direction of space exploration. Our rescue is available here and now on planet earth. The good news of reconciliation with our Creator is discovered in the person of the Son of God, Jesus Christ—God in human form, who died that we might have eternal life.

Have you had a personal encounter with Him?

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